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(54) User programmable entertainment method and apparatus

(57) The present invention provides a user programmable entertainment method and system that provides varied and ongoing custom entertainment services. The method of the present invention provides an entertainment signal comprising a sequence of discrete expressive works to an end user (at 100). The discrete expressive works represented in the entertainment signal may be either specifically requested by the user or selected according to user-specified parameters. The user defines a sequence of user preference items which together comprise a user preference signal. The user preference signal is then communicated to a remotely located program processor (175). The program processor selects (from 180) a plurality of discrete expressive works that conform to the user preference item definitions. An entertainment signal comprising the selected expressive works is then communicated over a communication link to the receiving means (110, 120, 130) located in the user node (100).

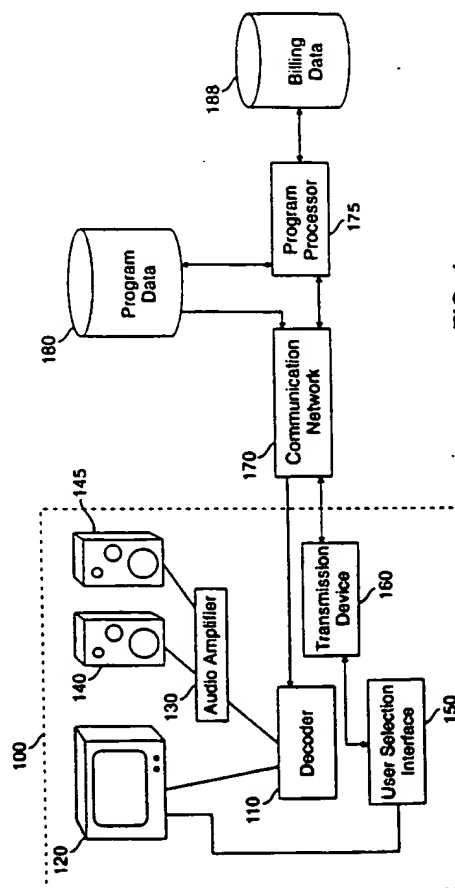


FIG. 1

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Description

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to the field of entertainment communication services, and particularly to those services employing digital audio and video transmission signals.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The advent of digital signal compression and increased communication bandwidth availability has made possible the realization of custom home entertainment services such as, for example, video-on-demand. In the past, the communications infrastructure provided only for broadcast entertainment. Consequently, in order to enjoy custom entertainment, one was required to purchase or rent entertainment storage devices such as video tapes, audio tapes or compact discs.

It is now possible, however, for a user to establish a point-to-point connection with an entertainment data base to retrieve a work of entertainment, for example, a movie, to view at any time. This provides an advantage over broadcast television of allowing a user to experience entertainment at a user-specified time. An example of such a system, known as a video-on-demand system, is disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,247,347. According to standard video-on-demand systems, a user specifies a title of a video work, and the video piece is provided to the user from the data base over a virtual circuit connection in a communication network. The term video as used herein in conjunction with the words "signal" or "work" refers to either video alone or video with accompanying audio. In contrast, the use of the term audio refers to solely audio.

Broadcast video, such as an ordinary television broadcast, as opposed to video-on-demand, offers the advantage of providing ongoing, varied entertainment. For example, a television station may offer a broadcast schedule consisting of a mix of news programs, game shows, situation comedies and movies over the course of an evening. Broadcast entertainment allows users to enjoy ongoing entertainment without requiring the user to specify each title.

As a result, the entertainment consumer may presently select to receive either ongoing and varied entertainment through broadcast transmissions or custom, discrete entertainment video-on-demand technology.

Similarly, the concept of an analogous audio-on-demand system is plainly feasible. Audio-on-demand has not received much attention, however, perhaps because of the perception that the time required to select a particular musical work, which in current popular music typically has a five minute or less duration, does not justify such capability. An audio-on-demand system similar to the video-on-demand system may also have less of a market because consumers are more likely to purchase

a desired musical piece than they would a video work. Consumers purchase musical works with the expectation of listening to the musical piece at a far higher repetition rate than they would a video recording. As a result, the combination of the time and effort required for using audio-on-demand and the popularity of purchasing musical recordings presently renders audio-on-demand less desirable than video-on-demand.

Furthermore, as in the case of video, consumers also have the option of listening to broadcast audio which provides varied and ongoing audio entertainment. Broadcast audio eliminates the inconvenience of constantly choosing new audio works. Moreover, home musical playback equipment can also offer limited ongoing and varied audio entertainment, such as a compact disc player with a multiple disc magazine. The drawback of such systems is that the consumer is nevertheless limited to selections from his or her own collection.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a user programmable entertainment method and system that provides varied and ongoing custom entertainment services. The method of the present invention provides an entertainment signal comprising a sequence of discrete expressive works to an end user. The discrete expressive works represented in the entertainment signal may be either specifically requested by the user or selected according to user-specified parameters.

According to the present invention, a user defines a sequence of user preference items, each defining a block of time in an entertainment signal, which together comprise a user preference signal. The user preference signal is then communicated to a remotely located program processor. The program processor selects a plurality of discrete expressive works that conform to the user preference item definitions. An entertainment signal comprising the selected expressive works is then communicated over a communication link to the receiving means located in the proximity of the user.

The entertainment signal may comprise an audio signal consisting of a plurality of musical, news or other audibly expressive works or, alternatively, a video signal consisting of a plurality of television or motion picture video works. The entertainment signal may suitably comprise a digital data signal compressed using standard data compression techniques.

The above discussed features, as well as additional features and advantages of the present invention, will become apparent by reference to the following detailed description and accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 illustrates an exemplary user-programmable entertainment system operable to provide custom audio and video signals according to one aspect of

the present invention;

FIG. 2 illustrates a functional flow diagram of the operations performed by a program processor to define the user preference signal utilized in the exemplary system in FIG. 1; and

FIG. 3 illustrates a functional diagram of the operations performed by the program processor to provide an entertainment signal that conforms to the user preference signal.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 shows an exemplary system for providing an entertainment signal comprising a plurality of discrete expressive works, the entertainment signal being defined by a consumer or user. A discrete expressive work comprises a singular piece of entertainment such as, for example, an episode of a television program, a movie, a song or a symphony. A discrete expressive work may ordinarily be referenced by title, although in some circumstances more information is required, such as a featured artist or the year of publication.

Consider, for example, a consumer or user of video services who desires to view, in sequence, one hour of news followed by two hours of situation comedies from the 1950's or 1980's, followed by a motion picture. The system in FIG. 1 allows the user to generate such a request and receive the appropriate or conforming television shows and movies.

In the exemplary system described below, each user of the entertainment services provided by the present invention requests and obtains entertainment services through a user node 100. The user node 100 consists of a decoder 110 connected to both a video display 120 and an audio amplifier 130, and a user selection interface 150 connected to both a transmission device 160 and the video display 120. The video display 120 comprises an ordinary television capable of receiving and displaying NTSC television signals. It is to be noted that the video display 120 may suitably be capable of receiving and audibly reproducing accompanying television audio signals. The audio amplifier 130 comprises a stereo receiver and amplifier which is further connected to a pair of loudspeakers 140 and 145.

The decoder 110 is connected to an external communication network 170. The decoder 110 comprises any suitable device for decompressing digital signals encoded according to a standard format, for example, one of the Motion Picture Expert Group (MPEG) formats. The decoder 110 further contains digital to analog conversion means.

The transmission device 160 is also connected to the communication network 170. The transmission device 160 may suitably comprise telephone terminal equipment or a modem. The communication network 170 may suitably be any network operable to provide a

point-to-point digital and analog signal communications. An example of a point-to-point digital data network capable of providing video data to individual users in a video-on-demand system is discussed in U.S. Patent No. 5,247,347, which is incorporated herein by reference.

A remotely located program processor 175 is also connected to the communication network 170. The program processor 175 is located at a location central to a plurality of user nodes which are similar to the user node 100. The program processor 175 comprises a computing device that operates to execute the functions within the flow chart discussed below in connection with FIGs. 2 and 3. The program processor 175 includes a program storage means for storing operating software.

The program processor 175 is operably connected to a data storage device 180, and a billing data storage device 188. A suitable configuration of a program processor, a data storage device, a billing storage device, and a communication network is disclosed in U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 08/056,973 entitled "Integrated Television Services System" filed May 3, 1993, which is also assigned to the assignee of the present invention and incorporated herein by reference.

The data storage device 180 stores various expressive works, such as television shows, movies and news programs in compressed digital data format. Although shown as a singular device, the data storage device 180 may comprise a plurality of storage devices which are switchably connected to the communication network 170. A suitable data storage configuration is disclosed in U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 07/997,925 entitled "Program Server for Interactive Television System" filed December 28, 1992, which is assigned to the assignee of the present invention and incorporated herein by reference.

The above described components operate in the following manner to provide entertainment signals. The user invokes the entertainment system by sending a start control signal to the program processor 175. To do so, the user enters a start request into the user selection interface 150. The user selection interface 150 provides a start signal to the transmission device 160, which in turn provides the start signal to the program processor 175 through the communication network 170.

The program processor 175 then solicits the user to define the user preference signal. To this end, the program processor 175 sends prompt signals through the communication network 170 to the user selection interface 150 through the transmission device 160. The prompt signals, which prompt the user to define the user preference signal, are communicated to the user through either a display means located on the user selection interface 150 or the video display 120.

The custom user preference signal may comprise, for example, a sequential list of movies, television shows, or other works, that should be transmitted in the entertainment signal. The user preference signal is organized as a sequence of user preference items. Each

user preference item (UPI) contains information about the desired attributes for a specific block of time in the entertainment signal. The UPI may contain information specifying either a particular discrete expressive work (DEW), for example, a motion picture title, or one or more attributes common to a plurality of DEWs, such as the genre or time period of a motion picture. In addition to selecting attributes or a title for each UPI, the user also defines the duration of each UPI, and may also select a particular starting time. A menu-driven program executed by the program processor 175 to achieve the foregoing is described below in connection with FIG. 2.

An exemplary user preference signal is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

UPI 1	genre:	news (national)
	duration:	1 hour
	starting time:	7:00 p.m.
UPI 2	genre:	situation comedy
	time period:	1950's or 1980's
	duration:	until 10:00 p.m.
UPI 3	genre:	series ("Twin Peaks")
	duration:	1 episode

Details regarding the generation of such a user preference signal are discussed below in connection with FIG. 2.

The user selections defining the user preference signal are entered in the user selection interface 150. The user selection interface 150 thereafter provides the user preference signal either as a batch, or contemporaneously as it is being defined, to the transmission device 160. The transmission device 160 transmits the user preference signal to the program processor 175 over the communication network 170.

To accomplish the above-described tasks, the user selection interface 150 and transmission device 160 may comprise any suitable means that allow the user to make selections and transmit the result. For example, a telephone terminal device may serve as the user selection interface 150 and transmission device 160. See, for example, U.S. Patent No. 5,247,347 for an example of a video-on-demand system that receives user requests over a telephone network. Alternatively, interactive television means may be used, and an infrared remote control may comprise the user selection interface 150. In such a case, the interactive television transmission signal may comprise the user preference signal.

After the user preference signal is defined, the program processor 175 facilitates transmission of the entertainment signal as described below. For each UPI in the user preference signal, the program processor first selects one or more appropriate DEWs meeting the UPI-defined requirements. Before the entertainment signal can be transmitted, however, the program processor 175 pro-

vides a control signal to the data storage device 180 to establish a point-to-point connection, also called a virtual circuit, with the user node 100.

The program processor 175 then locates the storage address of video or audio data for the first selected discrete expressive work within the data storage device 180. The program processor 175 then sends a control signal commanding the data storage device 180 to begin transmitting the data at the located storage address to the user station 100 over the communication network 170. After the data for the first DEW has been transmitted, the program processor 175 repeats the above operations for each DEW until the entire entertainment signal corresponding to the user preference signal has been transmitted. A more detailed explanation of the above described functions is given below in connection with FIG. 3.

The operation of the program processor 175 may be demonstrated by reference to an example. To this end, consider, for example, the user preference signal defined in Table 1 above. At 7:00 p.m., the program processor 175 locates the storage address of a national news program in a program storage device 180. The digital video data is then transmitted to the user located at the node 100. Before the news program is over, the program processor 175 then locates the data for the first randomly selected situation comedy from the 1950's or 1980's. Then, at the completion of the news program, the program processor 175 commands the data storage device 180 to begin transmitting data for the situation comedy.

Returning to the general operation of the system, the data storage device 180 provides the entertainment signal, which is in the form of a compressed video and/or audio digital signal, to the decoder 110 through the communication network 170. The decoder 110 decompresses the entertainment program signal and converts the signal to the appropriate analog signal format, discussed further below. The decoder then provides the converted entertainment signal to a device that renders the signal perceptible to humans, such as for example, the video display 120 and/or the amplifier 130 and speakers 140, 145.

The conversion of the decompressed digital signal to the appropriate analog signal compatible with current audio and video components is well known. In the case of video entertainment, the decoder 110 further converts the decompressed digital television signal to an analog NTSC video signal in order to be compatible with a standard television. Such conversion would be known to those of ordinary skill in the art. In the case of purely audio entertainment, the decompressed digital audio signal should be converted to an analog audio signal. Furthermore, the user may desire that the video display 120 and audio amplifier 130 both include switching devices that allow the user to switch between receiving broadcast signals on an antenna or cable connection and compressed digital signals from the decoder 110. Suitable switching devices are well known.

Additionally, the program processor 175 from time to time provides billing information to the billing data storage device 188. The exact method of billing is a business decision, but may include charging the user for each DEW included within the entertainment signal. For example, the user may be billed \$1.00 for an episode of "I Love Lucy" while being billed \$6.00 for a first run motion picture. In such a case, the data within the data storage device 180 for each DEW preferably includes its price data. The program processor 175 may suitably retrieve the price data from the data storage device 180 at the beginning of the transmission of each DEW and then transmit it to the billing storage device 188 at the conclusion of the entire entertainment signal.

FIGs. 2 and 3 illustrate a functional flow diagram of the operations of the program processor 175 from FIG. 1. Those of ordinary skill in the art could readily program the program processor in a manner suitable to perform the functions illustrated in flow diagram 200 in FIG. 2. The processor executing the steps in the flow diagram 200 enables the user to define a user preference signal comprising a sequence of user preference items. It should be noted that the functions of FIG. 2 operate in conjunction with a system wherein the user preference signal is generated from a menu-driven interactive system. Modifications, such as the modification of the flow diagram 200 to accommodate, for example, a natural language processor user interface would be known to one skilled in the art.

In step 210, the program starts upon detection of a start signal from the transmission device 160 from FIG. 1 indicating the presence of a user request to define a user preference signal. In step 215, the user defines one of the UPI's of the user preference signal, which contains information describing a discrete expressive work (DEW) or block of DEWs to be included in the entertainment signal. The UPI definition in step 215 is preferably menu driven and allows the user to select either attributes describing one or more DEWs or a specific DEW.

A sample menu for a purely audio program might allow the user to define: 1) a time period; 2) a genre; 3) an artist; or 4) a specific title. Upon selection of any particular menu item, the user may be prompted to enter a name or title, or further menus may appear. For example, if the user selects 2) genre, a second menu might appear, such as: 1) classical; 2) jazz; 3) pop; or 4) dance. The extent to which the user may define a combination of such attributes will vary extensively from system to system.

A menu further prompts the user to define the duration of the UPI as well. The duration of a UPI may be defined by a time limit, a specific number of DEWs, or an ending time. An exemplary UPI may consist of: Genre = Jazz; Time Period = 1952-1956 and Duration = 40 minutes.

In addition, the user may also be prompted to enter other information such as a specified start time for UPI. Finally, the user is also prompted to select alternatively

a particular DEW by title, such as the motion picture "Casablanca". UPIs comprising particularly described DEWs such as "Casablanca" are referred to herein as specific DEWs. UPIs comprising attribute information are referred to herein as non-specific DEWs.

The processor allows the user to choose selections from the menu driven prompts in step 215 until the processor receives a command indicating the UPI definition is complete. The processor then executes step 225.

In step 225, the processor determines whether the defined UPI contains information specifying a particular DEW, or in other words, comprises a specific UPI. If so, then the processor executes step 230. If not, however, and the UPI contains attribute information, then the processor executes step 235. In step 235, the processor queries the user whether the user would like to select a particular DEW from a list of several DEWs that conform to the UPI attribute specifications. If the answer in step 235 is yes, then the processor executes step 240. If, however, the answer in step 235 is no, then the processor returns to step 230.

In step 240, the processor creates a selection list of the available DEWs meeting the UPI attribute specifications. The processor may create the list by accessing a database containing DEW titles indexed by attributes. In the exemplary system in FIG. 1, the data storage device 180 may contain such a database. For example, for UPI 2 of the user preference signal in Table 1 above, the selection list comprises a list of situation comedies from the 1950's or 1980's. For a long list, perusal of the selection list may be menu driven as well. After creation of the selection list, the processor executes step 245. In step 245, the processor receives a user selection of one or more DEWs from the list, thereby converting the UPI to a specific UPI. The processor then executes step 230.

The execution of step 230 signifies that the current UPI has been defined, comprising either a specific UPI or a non-specific UPI. In step 230, the processor queries the user whether to display the user preference signal (UPS), or, in other words, list of UPIs, in its current state. If not, the processor executes step 250. If so, the processor provides the list of UPIs for display in step 255 and then executes step 250.

In step 250, the processor queries the user whether the UPS has been completely defined. If so, the processor may then execute step 305 of FIG. 3. If not, however, the processor returns to step 215 in order to allow the generation of another UPI.

FIG. 3 illustrates in flow diagram 300 the operations of the program processor 175 that provide the entertainment signal once the UPS is defined.

In step 305, the processor initializes contact with the data storage device 180 and instructs the data storage device 180 to establish a virtual circuit connection over the communication network 170. In step 310, the processor determines whether the UPS contains any more UPIs. For the first iteration, the answer in step 310 will ordinarily be yes. If, at some point, the answer to step

310 is no, then the processor proceeds to step 315 and stops. Otherwise, the processor executes step 320 wherein the next UPI is retrieved for processing.

After retrieving the next UPI in step 320, the processor executes step 325. In step 325, the DEW or DEWs comprising the UPI are identified. If the next UPI is a specific UPI, the DEW or DEWs are already identified and the processor proceeds to step 330. For a non-specific UPI, however, the processor must select one or more appropriate DEWs for inclusion in the entertainment signal. To this end, the processor generates a selection list of DEWs that fit the attributes defined in the UPI. Once the list is generated, the processor selects, at random, the appropriate number of DEWs needed to comply with the UPI durational specification.

To generate the selection list, the processor accesses a database of available DEW titles indexed by attribute as discussed above in connection with step 240. The DEW titles in the database should also contain durational information. Thus, for a UPI specifying a durational limit of an unspecified number of DEWs, such as, for example, two hours of sitcoms, the processor may select the maximum number of DEWs that will not exceed the durational specification. The processor will not normally select a number of DEWs that would surpass the time limit.

After selecting the one or more DEWs for the UPI, the processor executes step 330. In step 330, the processor determines whether filler work is required to maintain an uninterrupted entertainment signal. A filler work is a DEW selected by the processor to fit an undefined slot of time in the UPS. One or more filler work DEWs are required when the UPS time and durational requirements cannot be strictly met. Consider, for example, the definition of UPI 2 in the sample UPS of Table 1, wherein the durational specification is "until 10:00 p.m." It is unlikely that the selected DEWs, which in this case are 1950's or 1980's situation comedies, when transmitted in sequence, will end precisely at 10:00 p.m. In such a situation, filler work is required.

In step 330, therefore, the processor reviews the selected DEWs' durations and the UPI durational specification and determines if and how much filler work is required. The filler work should be chosen from a plurality of DEWs stored within a storage device such as the storage device 180 from FIG. 1. The filler work may comprise relatively short DEWs of varying lengths. The processor may then either insert all the filler work at the end of a particular UPI or intermix the filler work with selected DEWs within the UPI. Other schemes may be employed where the user may in some respects control the choice of filler work, but the resulting added complexity in the UPS definition sequence may not be desirable. Once the scheduling of the DEWs and filler works for the UPI is completed, the processor executes step 335.

In step 335, the processor identifies the next DEW to be transmitted and locates or identifies its storage address. The next DEW is determined by the UPI schedule

developed in step 330, above. Thus, the next DEW may comprise a selected DEW or a filler work DEW. At the time the next DEW, now the current DEW, is to be transmitted, the processor executes step 340. A DEW is to be transmitted at the time when the previous DEW is completed, or, in the case of the first DEW of the first UPI, at an assigned start time. In step 340, the processor sends a control signal to the data storage device to begin transmitting the data corresponding to the DEW to the user. While the DEW is being transmitted, the processor proceeds to step 345.

The processor remains at step 345 until either an interrupt is received or until the current DEW is almost over. By almost over, it is meant that the time left in the current DEW is sufficient for the processor to execute steps 350, 310, 320, 325 and 330 before the DEW transmission is completed. Because these steps require a minimal amount of processing, with the possible exception of accessing a database in steps 325 and 330, one or two minutes prior to the end of the previous DEW should be sufficient. When the current DEW is almost over, the processor executes step 350.

If an interrupt is received during the execution of step 345, the processor executes step 355. In step 355, the processor sends a control signal to the data storage device to halt the transmission of the entertainment signal. The processor then executes step 360. In step 360, the processor determines whether the user is interrupting to redefine the UPS or the user merely wants to pause the transmission. If the answer in step 360 is yes, in other words, the user has interrupted to redefine the UPS, the program returns to step 230 in FIG. 2. If, however, the answer in step 360 is no, then the processor executes step 365.

In step 365, the processor waits for a resume command from the user. The entertainment signal is not transmitted during the interrupt. After receipt of a resume command from the user, the processor executes step 370. In step 370, the processor sends a control signal to the data storage device to resume transmission of the current DEW. Upon completion of step 370, the processor returns to step 345.

In step 350, the processor determines whether any more DEWs are scheduled for the current UPI. If not, the program returns to step 310 to determine if there are any more UPIs. If the answer in step 350 is yes, however, the processor returns to step 335 to identify the next scheduled DEW in the current UPI.

In an alternative embodiment of the above system, the definition of the user preference signal, as discussed in connection with FIG. 2, may be accomplished exclusively by the user selection interface 150 within the user station 100. In this embodiment, the user selection interface 150 would include a processor that executes the functions shown in flow diagram 200. The user would then completely define the user preference signal prior to establishing connection with the program processor 175. The program processor 175 would otherwise oper-

ate to perform the functions in flow diagram 300 as discussed above.

In another embodiment of the above system, the program processor 175 and its complete functionality may be located in the user node 100. The program processor 175 would then communicate through the communication link 170 to send command signals to the data storage device 180 and/or billing device 188. A further modification would be to combine the functionality of the user selection interface 150, the decoder 110, the transmission device 160 and program processor 175, or any subset thereof, into one self-contained subsystem, such as, for example, a personal computer system. In yet another embodiment, the user selection interface of one user may be operable to define a user preference signal for an entertainment signal to be provided to the user node of a second user.

In another alternative embodiment, instead of executing a menu-driven interactive program such as the one discussed in connection with FIG. 2, the program processor 175 may suitably be programmed to allow the user to enter natural language commands such as, for example:

From 7:00 P.M. until 11:00 P.M. I'd like first, one hour of news, mostly national, with some international and local, followed by a mix of sitcoms from the 50's and 80's until roughly 10:00 P.M., then an episode of "Twin Peaks", and finishing with a short weather report. Natural language interpreters which could be used to generate a user preference signal from such commands are well-known in the art.

In yet another alternative embodiment of the above system, the user may be given the option to include live media, in other words, television or radio broadcasts, within the entertainment program signal. Thus, for example, the user may define a user preference item as either a live network news broadcast or a live sports program. In such a system, a source of compressed digital live broadcast signals would be connected to the program processor 175. For example, this source may comprise a common television or radio signal reception device and a means to convert a signal into compressed digital form.

To facilitate the inclusion of live media within the entertainment signal, the program processor 175 should operate essentially as described above, except that when the next UPI includes a live broadcast, the program processor 175 would instruct the source of live broadcasts to provide a data signal to the user node 100 over the communication network 170 instead of the data storage device 180. In this alternative embodiment, the step 350 of FIG. 3 will include sending a control signal to the source of live broadcasts to provide the live signal to the user node 100. Means for switching between the live broadcast source and the data storage source 180 will be apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art.

While an exemplary embodiment of the current invention has been shown and described, various modifications and substitutions may be made without deviating

from the spirit and scope of the invention. Thus, while the example describes the use of a standard NTSC analog television receiver, other video display devices including a video monitor, digital television, high definition television and the like may be used. Likewise, while the use of compressed digital data signals are used to transmit the entertainment signal, analog signals or uncompressed digital signals may be used. Such signals could be transmitted directly to the display device or audio amplifier without first entering a decoder. Although the use of analog signals or uncompressed digital signals would eliminate the need for a decoder 110, such signals would require more transmission bandwidth.

Claims

1. A system for providing an entertainment signal, the entertainment signal comprising a sequence of a selected plurality of discrete expressive works in compressed digital signal form, the system comprising:
 - a) a user selection interface for receiving a user preference signal, the user preference signal comprising a sequence of a plurality of user preference items, each user preference item comprising information corresponding to at least one of the chosen plurality of discrete expressive works;
 - b) a decoder operable to receive and decompress a compressed signal, said decoder operably connected to a communication network, said communication network operable to establish point-to-point communications;
 - c) a video display device connected to the decoder;
 - d) a data storage device containing data for a plurality of discrete expressive works said data storage device operably connected to the communication network; and
 - e) a program processor connected to the user selection interface and connected to the data storage device, the program processor operable to command the data storage device to provide the entertainment signal to the decoder, said entertainment signal conforming to the user preference signal.
2. The system in claim 1 wherein the video display device is a television and the decoder further comprises digital to analog signal conversion means.
3. The system of claim 1 wherein at least one of said

- user preference items comprises information specifying one or more attributes common to more than one discrete expressive works and wherein the program processor is operable to select one of the more than one discrete expressive works.
4. The system of claim 1 wherein the program processor is located at a location remote from the decoder.
 5. A system for providing an entertainment signal, the entertainment signal comprising a sequence of a selected plurality of discrete expressive works, the system comprising:
 - a) a user selection interface for receiving a user preference signal, the user preference signal comprising a sequence of a plurality of user preference items, each user preference item comprising information corresponding to at least one of the chosen plurality of discrete expressive works;
 - b) a device operable to receive an entertainment signal, said device operably connected to a communication network, said communication network operable to establish point-to-point communications;
 - c) a data storage device containing data for a plurality of discrete expressive works, said data storage device operably connected to the communication network; and
 - d) a program processor connected to the user selection interface and connected to the data storage means, the program processor operable to command the data storage means to provide the entertainment signal to the receiving device, said entertainment signal conforming to the user preference signal.
 6. The system in claim 5 wherein the entertainment signal comprises an audio signal and the system further comprises an audio amplifier connected to the receiving device.
 7. The system of claim 5 wherein the entertainment signal includes a video signal and the system further comprises a video display apparatus connected to the receiving device.
 8. The system of claim 5 wherein at least one of said user preference items comprises information specifying a unique discrete expressive work.
 9. The system of claim 5 wherein at least one of said user preference items comprises information specifying one or more attributes common to more than one discrete expressive works and wherein the program processor is operable to select one of the more than one discrete expressive works.
 10. The system of claim 5 wherein the entertainment signal comprises a sequence of a selected plurality of discrete expressive works in compressed digital signal form and the device for receiving the entertainment signal includes a means for decompressing compressed digital signals.
 11. The system of claim 5 wherein the program processor is located in close proximity to the device for receiving the entertainment signal.
 12. The system of claim 5 wherein the program processor is located at a location remote from the device for receiving the entertainment signal.
 13. The system of claim 5 wherein the data storage device contains compressed digital data representative of at least one expressive work.
 14. The system of claim 5 wherein the program processor is further operable to generate billing data, and the system further comprises a billing data storage means connected to the program processor.
 15. A method of providing an entertainment signal, the entertainment signal comprising a sequence of a plurality of discrete expressive works, the method comprising:
 - a) enabling a user to generate a user preference signal comprising a sequence of a plurality of user preference items, each user preference item comprising information corresponding to at least one discrete expressive works;
 - b) providing the user preference signal to a program processor;
 - c) employing the program processor to command a data storage device to generate an entertainment signal comprising a sequence of a selected plurality of discrete expressive works, the sequence of discrete expressive works corresponding to the sequence of user preference items in the user preference signal; and
 - d) effecting communication of the entertainment signal to a means for receiving the entertainment signal.
 16. The method of claim 15 wherein step a) further comprises the steps of:

i) prompting the user to provide information corresponding to at least one discrete expressive work;

ii) receiving the information corresponding to at least one discrete expressive work, the information defining a user preference item; and

iii) repeating steps i) and ii) for a sequence of a plurality of user preference items.

17. The method of step 16 further comprising a step following step ii) of:

if the user preference item comprises information specifying at least one attribute common to more than one discrete expressive work, then generating a selection list of discrete expressive works possessing the attribute, and prompting the user to select from said list.

18. The method of step 15 wherein step c) comprises the steps of:

i) identifying the next user preference item in the user preference signal;

ii) if the next user preference item comprises information specifying one or more attributes common to more than one discrete expressive works, then selecting at least one discrete expressive work possessing the one or more specified attributes, and redefining the information comprising said next user preference item as specifying the selected discrete expressive work;

iii) commanding a data storage device to provide the discrete expressive work specified by the next user preference item; and

iv) repeating steps i) and ii) for all the user preference items in the user preference signal.

19. The method of claim 15 further comprising the step:

f) providing the entertainment signal to a means capable of rendering the entertainment signal perceptible to humans.

20. The method of claim 15 wherein the entertainment signal comprises compressed digital data and the means for receiving the entertainment signal includes a means for decompressing digital data.

21. The method of claim 15 wherein at least one user preference items contains durational information.

22. The method of claim 15 wherein at least one user preference item contains information indicating a

user specified quantity of discrete expressive works.

23. The method of claim 15 wherein the sequence of a selected plurality of discrete expressive works includes one or more filler works.

24. The method of claim 16 wherein the information specifying at least one discrete expressive work comprises information specifying one or more attributes common to a plurality of works.

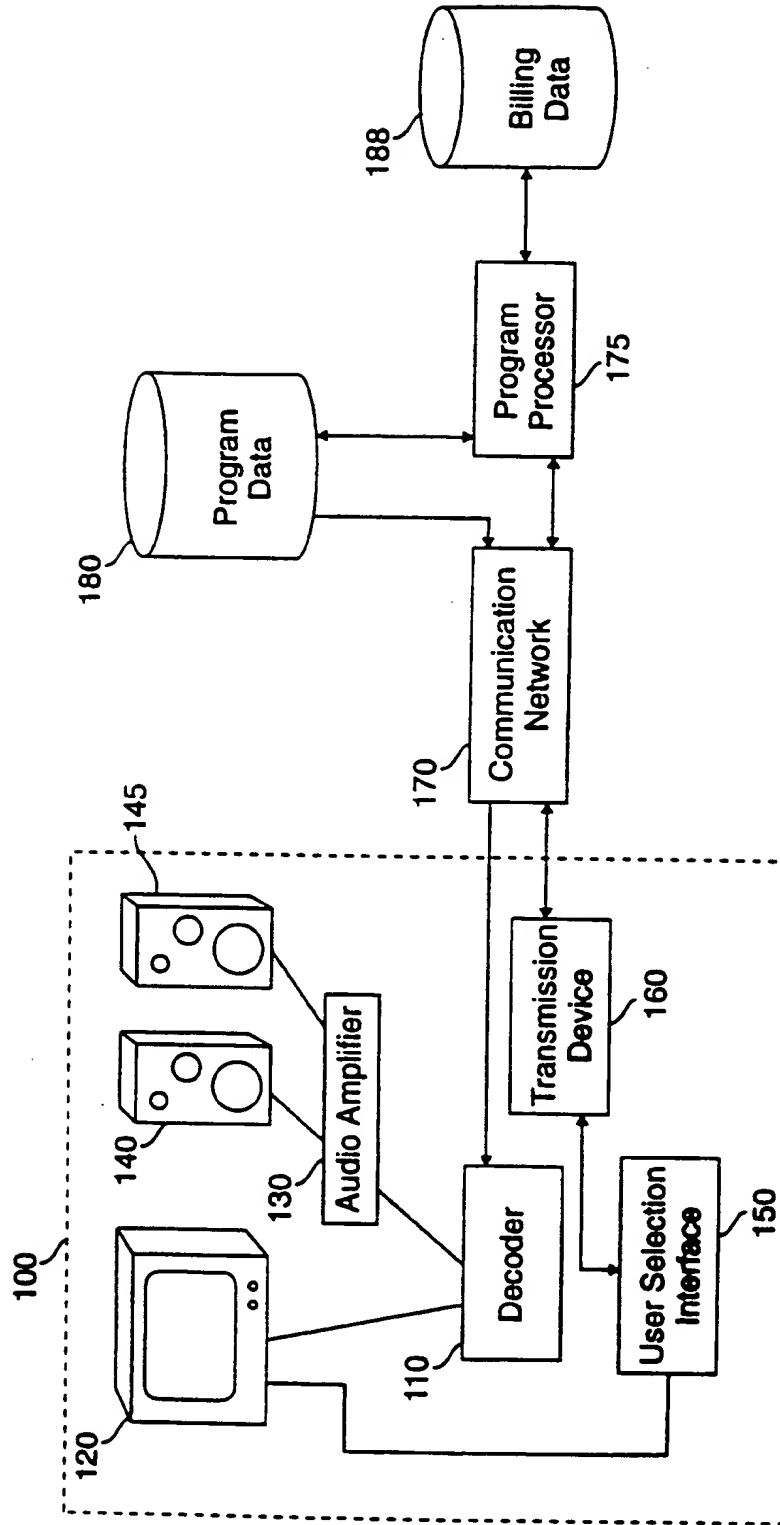
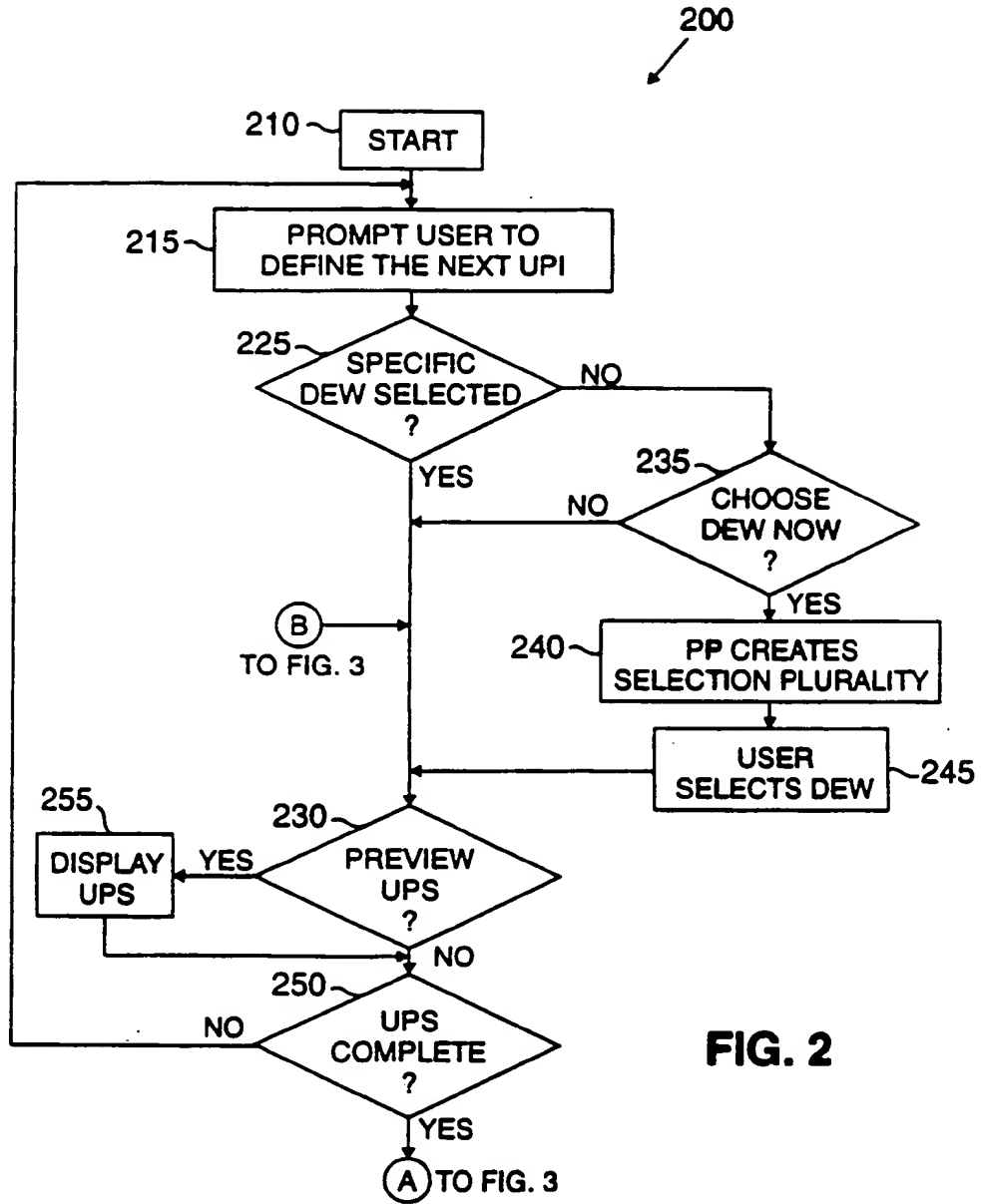


FIG. 1

**FIG. 2**

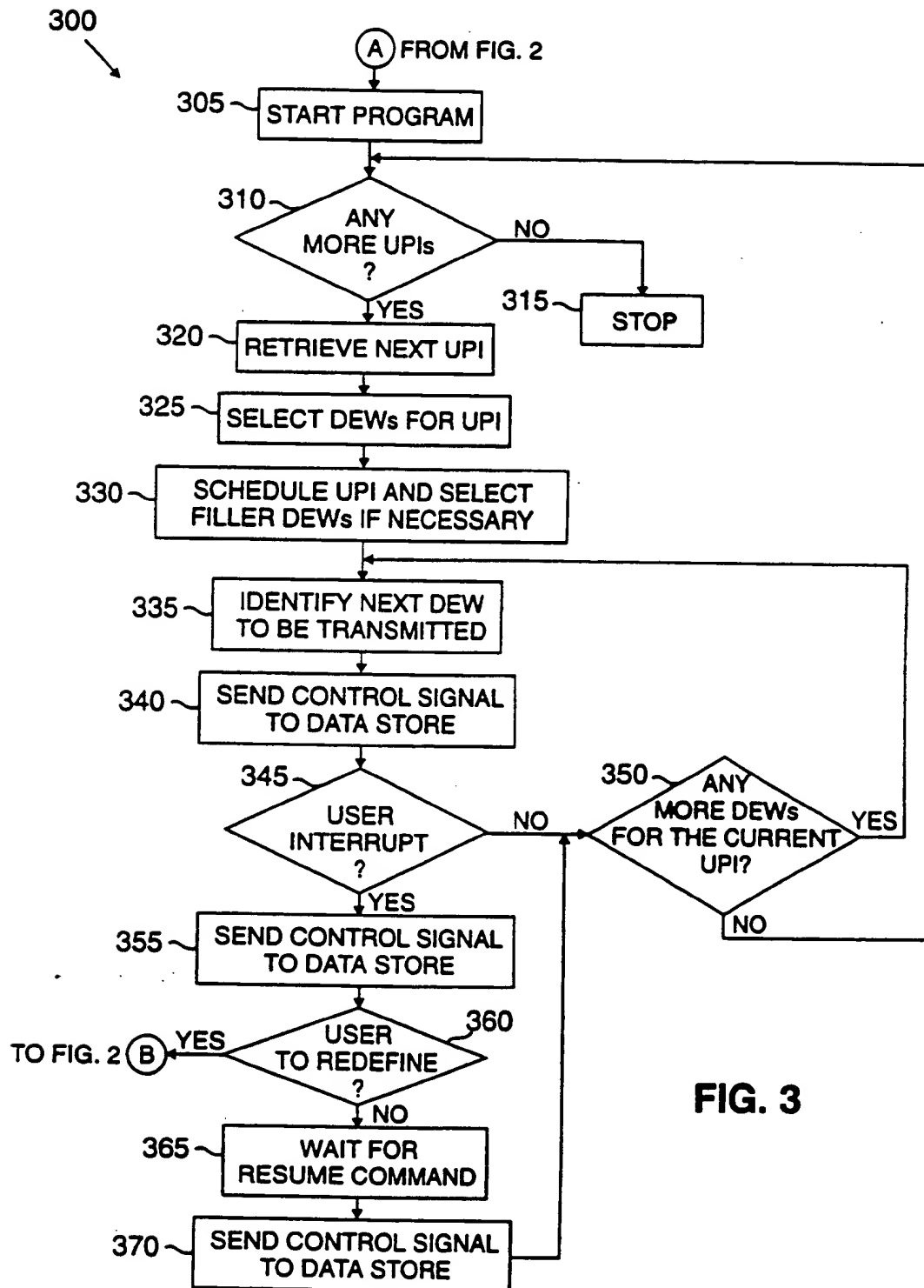


FIG. 3

European Patent
Office

EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 95 30 4313

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT			
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int. CL.6)
X	IEEE COMMUNICATIONS MAGAZINE, vol. 32, no. 5, May 1994 NEW YORK, NY, US, pages 82-88, XP 000451098 DELODDERE ET AL 'Interactive Video On Demand' * the whole document *	1-24	H04N7/173
X	WO-A-94 03894 (E SYSTEMS INC) 17 February 1994 * page 1, line 1 - line 5 * * page 3, line 2 - line 25 * * page 5, line 2 - page 13, line 2 * * figures 1,2 *	1-24	
X	US-A-5 133 079 (BALLANTYNE DOUGLAS J ET AL) 21 July 1992 * column 2, line 63 - column 6, line 55 * * figures 1-6 *	1,2, 5-15,19, 20	
X	US-A-5 119 188 (MCCALLEY KARL W ET AL) 2 June 1992 * column 1, line 65 - column 3, line 2 * * column 4, line 58 - column 5, line 12 * * column 5, line 50 - column 15, line 64 * * figures 1-12 *	1-13, 15-20	TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int. CL.6) H04N
X	US-A-4 920 432 (EGGERS DEREK C ET AL) 24 April 1990 * column 1, line 56 - column 2, line 12 * * column 3, line 13 - column 9, line 52 * * column 12, line 18 - column 13, line 20 * * column 14, line 67 - column 15, line 8 * * figures 1-11 *	1,3-9, 11,12, 15-19	
The present search report has been drawn up for all claims			
Place of search THE HAGUE		Date of completion of the search 10 October 1995	Examiner Van der Zaai, R
<p>CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS</p> <p>X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document</p> <p>T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons A : member of the same patent family, corresponding document</p>			

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